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# THE SCHOOL REVIEW

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## *PARENS IRATUS: HIS CAUSE AND CURE*

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WILLIAM McANDREW

Principal of the Washington Irving High School, New York City

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I, too, in my day have read many books on education. They seem to me to have a good deal of what might appear to be pure science. Their formulae are calculated for a vacuum. They disregard the element of friction. This following trial will not content the educational expert. It would not have been thrust upon you but for the fact that on the editorial staff of this *Review* is one of my boys of twenty years ago, who asked for "something."

I bought a letter file in 1887. The habit has endured. I have just gone through a large pile of letters sent twenty-three years ago by fathers and mothers regarding their children then attending our Chicago high school. I seem to have been walking through a cemetery. Willie, Ollie, Danny, and all the affectionately labeled personalities are dead, some without successors. But many of them are transformed into men and women averaging forty years of age; some, constructors of huge buildings; some, shrewd and shifty accumulators of dollars; some, honest, steady, reliable citizens; some, dignified mothers of beautiful children; some, soilers of other homes than their own. Some few are making in life the sort of records which they made in school, but so many are at such a wide variance from what we rated them day by day as to incline me to abstain from

any eulogy of teachers' ratings, principals' judgments, or high schools' assistance of the survival of the fittest.

In these twenty-three years the style of letter written by parents to the schoolmaster doesn't seem to me to have undergone much change.

DEAR SIR [writes a city official, February 7, 1887]: I have no time to be bothered with your letters about the school work of my daughter Queenie. I have noted from month to month her low standing in lattan but have not been disturbed by it believing she was in the hands of teachers competent to educate her. I believe she is as capable and industrious as the average pupil and believe that if the effort expended in writing letters criticizing her standing had been given to assisting her the result would have been different. It seems to me that your duties lie in the direction of ascertaining the causes of failure and in correcting them rather than in humiliating your pupils by *mailing* to the parent a *letter* of the character that I have been honored with.

On my desk is a letter of October 27, 1910, to a teacher in our present school:

DEAR MADAM: Please do not bother me with letters about the standing of my daughter. I and my ancestors before me have paid taxes in this city for seventy-five years and we send our children to be taught not to be complained about. If instead of writing letters you would explain your lessons to May and would teach them to her you would not need to waste postage.

I cannot complain that letters like these occur in large numbers. On the contrary, many of the cheeriest and most grateful sort are in the pack. But this essay is concerned with the stings of the schoolmaster's life which come from the angry pa.

The rudeness of parental letters depressed me so deeply in the early days that I became afraid that I was myself of such inferior personality as to draw this sort of missile fire. But once in the office of the eminent William C. Collar in his school in polite Boston he handed me a letter which had just come from the father of one of his boys. It made the worst notes I had received seem like invitations to tea. The contempt we get is for the profession, not for the professor.

The irate parent will be with us through this generation. The school has not yet acclimated him. Teachers dread an

interview with him as acutely as they did in 1887. They will let a child fail rather than write home. What causes *ira parentis*? Do you think our own incompetency a prominent factor?

During these twenty-three years there have been at one time and another about four hundred of us teachers working in various sized groups of which I have been one individual. I cannot count more than ten who seemed to have a clear and persistent idea of what we should bring children to be or who made use of our daily exercises in a way that resulted in a high-grade development of children. Of my college professors and of my previous teachers I can recall only four or five who seemed to know what I needed and how to get me to profit by it. During most of my time as a teacher I have been concerned with "covering the subject" in the cases of such of the children as responded. Upon the others I used a traditional process which was in no intelligent way different from my presentation of the subject to everybody. When I began to teach, twenty-five years ago, the habit of a principal or superintendent of thoroughly testing whether the children had been really taught or not was going out of fashion. In the schools with which I am familiar, now, such means of keeping up efficient teaching are less in use than then. In analyses of causes of failure of children made by school authorities I never see "poor teaching" mentioned as one, and yet I cannot get away from the suspicion that in every declaration of the angry father that "we ought to know how to make his boy succeed" there is enough of truth to make us chary of flatly contradicting him.

Everybody is teachable. Every soul has abilities. Some personalities run along at quarter-power and fail. What are we for if it be not to awaken the sluggish, the lazy, the impudent, the ones who do not like us? The others would succeed for anyone. If we propose ourselves as teachers, it means that we are of especial service to those who need a teacher. The complacent attitude of giving out the lessons and hearing them recited by such as study them brings us very little ahead. Isn't it true that a school administration should require a teacher

more and more to study the mental disease of the delinquent and to apply specific treatment for curing him?

It hardly helps matters to complain. There seems too much of the condemnatory in the letters sent home. Like begets like. The answer that comes back is abuse. The failing student claims that injustice has been done him. "He whispered once and ever since the teacher has failed him." If no teacher ever made so foolish a mistake as this, such charges would die out. But teachers do juggle their scholarship marks to punish for deportment. Teachers do "get down on children." There is not any kind of unfairness, pettiness, prejudice, or tyranny that school people are free from, any more than there is any other class of people that is wholly free from sin.

I have found that the positive rather than the negative kind of letter home does the most good. "Your daughter Myrtle is in my class and sometimes recites well. If I could get her to keep up to such a grade all the time she would pass. What can you suggest to help me?" "I am hoping and expecting to get Margaret through her Latin this term. I shall, if she does better. Could you see me and advise me about her?"

I don't get every teacher to take to notices like these. They tell me such letters are not severe enough and will do no good. Perhaps it's a matter of temperament. Encouragement increases my moderate powers. Failure and threat of failure paralyze them. In this I am in good company, as witness the letters and diaries of Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Wesley, Andrew D. White, and 'Gene Wood.

When *pater iratus* calls and begins loud talk I send for his offspring and the teacher immediately. Or rather, I go after them myself, to prevent the parent's expression to me of complaints more fervid than the man ever will utter when the woman herself is present. On the way I say to the teacher alone: "Listen to him calmly. Let him talk himself out. If he begins to cross-question you, don't defend. Let me re-ask such questions as I think pertinent. Then you ask him what he thinks you ought to have done. Be very careful not to show any feeling of indignation or contempt, for we *are* public ser-

vants. He's one of the public. We can't teach him much, but we'll not give him any cause to criticize our manners."

This complaint of the manner is too powerful a weapon to put into the hands of the angry caller.

We had a counter across the office in the Pratt High School. Two very excited ladies pounced upon me once for not excusing their girls early. The tongue-storm lasted several minutes, blown across this counter by the women on one side against me leaning on the other. I won out on the dismissal question, but the ladies filed with the trustees a complaint of discourtesy because they had not been asked to sit down.

Do you ask yourself, Why dwell upon cases like this? Because, disagreeable as he is, the *parens iratus* is as much a feature of school management as courses of study are, and his amelioration is a problem as deeply involved in the progress of education as is the method of teaching indirect discourse.

I like to let the abusive caller vent his spleen upon a teacher for a few minutes and then say: "Do you know, I think I can see where all the trouble comes from."

*Pater* or *mater* usually turns to me then and waits.

"I think possibly," I say, "that this girl has used the same manner toward this lady as you are using toward her yourself."

This works in one of two ways: either as a sort of bludgeon between the eyes, stunning; or as a whip, exciting, to the point that the teacher and I for the rest of the interview are winners, because we are cool and the disturber is off his head. Then we acknowledge humbly our desire as public servants to do as we should, and papa, rather the worse for wearing himself out, is ours.

You see, the irate parent is likely to be so much in the wrong that it would not be right to give way to him. Because he has one or two boys at home he thinks his view is conclusive for an organization with hundreds of children. It is as if a woman who can run a *cha'ng* dish would offer suggestions on the management of an army kitchen. But in every one of these tempestuous complainants I always find myself discovering the germs

of an honest resentment against some more or less vague injustice.

My pile of letters can't convince me that there were more objectors in those days. On the contrary, the measurements I have made of newspaper criticisms in 1887 as compared with 1910 show that discontent with schools is greater than it was. The *parentes irati* are not only more numerous but I think they are more intelligent than they were a quarter of a century ago. Sh! Let me whisper. I'm one of them. My own children are in the public elementary and high schools. The theories I have defended for years aren't working. There are twenty high schools in this town. One by one I have seen their principals send their own children to private schools. The grind in our public institutions is too heavy. Your Chicago papers cry "too much home work"; the New York journals do the same. I have an envelope full of suggestions for the management of high-school lessons so that the home-work abuse will disappear. None of them will work. The division of a child's time among four or seven teachers without excessive home work does not exist in any high school generally known to the educational world. In colleges the lack of reasonable regulation of outside study by professors has brought about the impossibility of excellence in scholarship and therefore the acceptance of mediocrity. I spent a day in a university last spring to try to locate the cause of the failure of a good boy I had sent there. The lad's classmates told me that no one could get all the lessons assigned. The dean confessed it. Occasion took me to Boston a little while later, where a Harvard student and an attendant upon the Institute of Technology told me the same.

The number of high-school children who do well is pitifully small. High-school management cannot improve this much. You cannot bring much pressure upon the teacher, for she can truthfully reply: "I conduct my recitations properly. I teach my fifty minutes a day, but I cannot go to the homes of every one of my children and there make them work properly." Don't you see this fatal weakness of our system? We have no teaching of the art of study before we permit the children by them-

selves to practice it. They teach themselves mind wandering, dozing in front of a book, time-wasting. Common consent places the responsibility for educating children upon the schools, but the schools rely too much upon undirected, unknown goings-on at home. I would not undertake to build your house if every day when I was gone someone less skilled than I fussed with the brick and mortar.

I'm ready, if I were permitted, to cut out home work altogether, and require no teacher or child to do anything outside of hours. Studying should be done at stated times in suitable rooms and supervised by study experts, so that it might be taught. To do this I should like a six-hour day, with suitable exercise upon the roof in the open air. Our workers, old and young, would leave their business cares at their place of business when they went home.

One circumstance that makes me believe that such a plan would decrease the number of irate parents is the record of certain classes in three high schools:

AVERAGE SUCCESSES PER HUNDRED STUDENTS IN THREE HIGH SCHOOLS

Subjects Requiring No Home Study,		Subjects Depending on Home Study	
Spelling .....	96	Algebra .....	69
Drawing .....	98	Geometry .....	58
Dressmaking .....	98	English .....	70
Music .....	97	French .....	63
Cooking .....	98	German .....	61
Bookbinding .....	100	Latin .....	69
Typewriting .....	93	Science .....	61
Penmanship .....	98	History .....	71

From the standpoint of the manager of a school, the cutting out of home work means simplicity and strength. It abolishes the present reliance upon scattered and irresponsible parents, whom you cannot supervise or require to perform their duties. It fixes upon a person paid for it the responsibility of getting work done. It reduces deficiency in scholarship in most instances to cases of discipline. Failure to work in such circumstances is disobedience. We know better how to deal with that than with



the distant and unseen affairs in the pupil's home. I believe this is one cure for *parens iratus*.

Another irritating cause is children's lack of interest in what we give them. In that Hyde Park high school twenty-five years ago we used parts of Caesar, Cicero, and Vergil, with a large amount of Latin grammar, as a medium of education. The natural interest of the various children in this was small. The grammar was to some extent directed toward facility in reading, but the most of the work in grammar was an end in itself. It is so yet, and it is not interesting. For myself, after years of trying it, I cannot get myself educated by uninteresting things. James Freeman Clarke and the members of his family got education out of Latin, but they did not do it our way. The grammar came only as needed, and was never needed in one-tenth of the amounts that we give. They read and read, and after that they read—Ovid, Varro, Catullus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Tacitus. We don't. We have not selected the most valuable Latin to read. Rome lasted twelve hundred years; you confine your study of her literature to less than a hundred. You say you have selected the best authors. You have not. There are a score of Latin pieces more interesting to me and more interesting to children than these three authors. There are hundreds of passages more inspiring, more thought-provoking, more informing, more potent in every quality that makes literature.

Your Latin scholarship is poorer today than it ever was. You can't get enthusiasm for it, because monotony kills enthusiasm. Near me is a Latin teacher who was at it in 1886. He is not teaching one line that he did not teach that year. You cannot make me believe that this sort of repetition can avoid stultifying a man's mind to the point of near imbecility. He corrects every translation to conformity with the style to which his ear has become formed. Every variation from this disturbs him. He cannot translate a new sentence with the facility of his second-year students. Not only is he pottering over the same passages term after term, but his neighbors are doing the same. The Latin classes in Los Angeles are doing the same work as those in Bangor. Where is the progress in this?

Something of the same uniformity and monotony is evident in French and German and English and mathematics and science. You let a teacher go over the same details year after year, when there are just as good materials for study in the same departments of knowledge. This is the sort of process that psychologists say produces stupidity.

What preventive of this result do we give high-school teachers? Nothing effective that I know of. Are stupidity, monotony, mechanical mental processes, laziness, indifference, absent from us? I do not find that we are singularly alert, adaptive, or progressive. We seem to me pretty much all alike, doing the same things in the same way and producing a larger amount of mediocrity every year. We confess that we are in a rut, and we let ourselves be characterized in medical advertisements as "the tired teachers."

We have the most perfect system and the poorest education that we ever had. The oftener we get together and agree upon a common way of doing things, the more frequently we have a report of a committee of ten or of thirteen or of fifteen, the more completely do the rest of us stop thinking and adopt a common plan. The analogy of business organization and of military formation has equipped us with a system that defeats the purpose with which teaching originally set out: the education of the powers of youth toward their realization. No man can educate youth to think unless he himself is a thinker. No man can be a thinker and spend the better part of his time doing the same thing over and over. The stultification of intelligence by employment in factories is not so serious to America as the deadening of teachers by uniformity.

We have made a fetish of a system, a course of study, a subject. The purpose of your Latin teacher is the Latin grammar and the selected passages. Accuracy, good English speech, industry, taste, or any specified kind of human efficiency, if it comes at all, is a by-product of your Latin-teaching process and not the aim your instructor intelligently works for. As a result of this centering upon the selected means instead of upon the end he often produces, by means of Latin, inaccuracy, wretched

English,<sup>1</sup> lazy use of translations, and distaste for literature. The purpose of the physics teacher is to cover the subject. He has specialized upon the subject, not upon any human ability which he regards it as his especial function to strengthen. The physics specialists have united; they have made uniform courses. They are repeating them year after year. They have turned one of the most fascinating of subjects into one cordially detested by thousands of girls and by hundreds of boys. Your whole high-school faculty is made up of persons centered upon subjects, not of experts in human nature or human growth at all. You cannot get a good position on a horse-farm because you have raised oats or studied the manufacture of harness. You can, however, get a place as an educator of youth if you have gone through a course of Latin, Greek, or chemistry.

Reasoning it out philosophically or comparing it empirically with any successful work in other industries, do you see any reason why our study-centered system of education should satisfy any larger number of parents than it does?

If you set out to cure human patients, or develop dumb animals, or raise flowers, would you not expect to make your aim certain living products brought to an improved state of advancement? Would you not hesitate to have it known that you were pursuing exactly the same course with each of your charges that every other physician or trainer or grower was following with his? There is only one circumstance in which I can see that you would be justified in all following the same course, and that would be if that course had always produced 100 per cent of successes.

But this high-school procedure doesn't do that at all. In this pile of letters of twenty-five years ago the names of those rated highest or even satisfactory in the educational processes we carried on in Hyde Park are those of persons who neither in 1890 nor in 1900 nor in 1910 were highest or even satisfactory in their service in the world. Among the children whom in 1886

<sup>1</sup>Did you ever read more continuously dreary English than the volumes of translations constituting any classical library? The men who produce these monstrosities are eminent linguistic scholars.

we drove from school discouraged by their failures in our arbitrary and uniform succession of daily exercises are those of men and women who today are more efficient individuals than many of those whom we ranked higher in algebra and Greek. The high-school procedure has not produced 100 per cent of success or 90 per cent of successes or 80 per cent of successes in any count of students I can make.

For that reason neither you nor I dare maintain that in the education of the children this day sent to us we can be justified in choosing as the means of educating them the same means that every other high school chooses. The very fact that it is just the same in Portland as in Kankakee condemns it. The fact that it has changed so little in twenty-five years condemns it more. Nor will the trooping after manual training or vocational education alleviate the trouble much, if we go trooping all together.

What we want, as I conceive it, is a centering of our attention on the children, and a resolution as to what abilities and what mental equipment we shall give them. Then we ought to be more free in every school to devise the daily exercises to bring about the growth we seek. As soon as that becomes the purpose of education, the fact that there are many roads to the same point will break up this retarding uniformity which now disgraces us. San Francisco's school system won't look any more like Boston's than San Francisco looks like Boston. Why should it?

Moreover we shall have a rule forbidding anyone to use the same authors or exercises more than three times running, just as we had a contract at college with our dining-hall preventing monotony of menus. This will do something to prevent us from becoming uninteresting and unfit persons to associate with curious-minded youth.

The freedom to select from all knowledge, not merely from the little field of present high-school studies, the exercises we ourselves want to use wherewith to train youth to thinking, feeling, and doing will of necessity produce a new type of teacher, a discoverer, an inventor, a progressor. Such a one, with his

purpose centered upon persons, not upon books, will necessarily grow into a more human personality. He is bound to come nearer satisfying his constituency than we do at present, because dissatisfaction with us now could scarcely be greater.

If you make public education a process of developing children according to their capabilities and needs, you will at least be able to answer the irate parent: "I'm doing the best I know how. You tell me a better way and I'll try it." At present you can't say any such thing. You have to answer: "Here's the course of study the authorities provide. It was never formed after a study of your boy and what he needs. It was handed down to us from an alien civilization, and you can take it or leave it, but you've got to pay for it anyhow."

This situation perpetuates discontent among parents.

I submit to you therefore that the *parens iratus* is a nuisance but a necessary one, and that he is not getting what he ought, and that the reformation of the service ought to spring from those who are giving it, that the work of the schools ought to be based upon children, not upon system, and that it ought never again to be permitted to attain to the uniformity it now discloses.